EPIC POETRY

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It is the unique distinction of the literature of the Greeks that the best comes first. With other peoples the efflorescence of national genius waits upon slower processes of germination. With the Greeks, at the very dawn of their history, poetry had burst forth into immortal bloom. The evolution in orderly sequence of the later products of Hellenic literature can be fairly well discerned; the antecedents of the epic alone lie far beyond our vision, as they lay far beyond the vision of the Hellenes themselves. The stories of Achilles and Odysseus absorbed or displaced alike the primitive hymns to the gods and the songs in honor of the other heroes of the race. In their past the Greeks discovered no authentic poetry older than *Iliad* or *Odyssey.* All the rest had vanished in the thin air of irreparable loss.

Unlike the moderns, the Greeks were untroubled to discover the sources whose mingled currents made that large stream of Homer whence were drawn all forms of eloquence in Greece itself; even as Homer himself says that all rivers and fountains spring originally from Father Ocean. Thrice and four times happy were the Greeks in their almost total lack of prescience of the dread "Homeric Question," whose persistent intrusion into literary criticism since Wolf's *Prolegomena* might well seem to indicate to the world at large that those who deal with Greek at first hand find the permanent value of the Greek epic less in the great love and long study of the art and humanity of its greatest monuments than in chasing the *ignis fatuus* of a typical problem of methodical research. If we are not to rob ourselves of

our serener joy, we must not "ask questions that would cause a man to hang himself," as Dr. Johnson said to the indefatigable Boswell. And such a question is the "Homeric Question."

The literary appreciation of Homer has long had to pay a large part of the cost of acquitting the poet from the charge of writing either or both *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* and in either case of possessing genius so audacious as to transcend the critic's measure of human faculty. The just estimation of the two national epics of Greece is impaired if we care first for the parts and last for the whole, and are not content to remain, in guarded moments, incurious whether the *Iliad* is a consolidation of a "Wrath of Achilles" and a "Fall of Ilium" and whether the *Odyssey* contains a conflation of two "Returns" of the hero. The scholar must be the most searching of critics and at the same time preserve undisturbed another self that is able to estimate larger literary values, and especially the unity of moral situation. Did not the mighty Descartes acquiesce in a *via media* and bid his obstinate questionings cease before the source of the moral unity of the world? We must learn to confess, at least in moments of aesthetic calm, a certain apathy to the vicissitudes of the struggle between Separatists and Unitarians; we must regain the *naïveté* of the Greeks themselves, and yield an unconditional surrender to the grandeur and charm of the Homeric poems by whomsoever written and at whatever time. The safety of unalloyed delight must not be imperiled by agitation of the overhanging Question.

In certain passes of the Alps, the poet Gray says in his Journal, the traveler is urged by his guides to press on lest the very agitation of the air should loosen the snows above and overwhelm the caravan. "I took their counsel," says the poet, "and hastened on in silence": —

Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa.

But in tacitly substituting Homer for my proper theme, the Greek epic, it may seem that, like the Earl of Oxford in Pope's time, I have an epical way of beginning in the middle of things. And yet, in the final estimate of the cultural influences of Greek literature upon the modern world, no other poems, much less any other of the many Greek epics, can rival *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in their enduring value.

No other epic poet of Greece might venture to trespass on Homer's themes. The lost epics of the tale of Troy moved round the periphery of the circle at whose centre stood the wrath of Achilles, and the home-coming of Odysseus. The lost epics of the story of Oedipus and Heracles paled before the radiance of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It was mere similarity to the external form and style of Homer that gave the name epic to the cosmogonical and didactic poems of Hesiod and to the attempts of the early philosophers to set forth the Nature of Things. The Greek epic owes its indefeasible value neither to Hesiod's mythological panorama of the evolution from chaos of the primal forces of nature and its peerage of the Olympians, nor to his exposition of the homely moralities that give a spiritual setting to the peasant's daily round of toil; still less to the "philosophic epic" of Parmenides and Empedocles. The Greek epic lives only through the two poems that have survived out of the mass of heroic minstrelsy — the tale of battle and debate of those fifty-one days (in a ten years' war) that witnessed Achilles's wrath and Hector's death, and the picture of adventure and social life in which the central figure is the war-worn, storm-tossed, and home-sick son of Laërtes, whose story the poet has compressed within the span of the forty-one days of the *Odyssey*. The revival of the heroic epic in the Alexandrian and Roman ages is but the faint reflection of the waning splendor of the sun — the *Argonautica*, a *pièce justificative*, written to disprove the contention of the

autocrat of the Museum that the epic of Homer might not suffer imitation, and the other artificial heroic epics — the *Posthomerica*, the *Dionysiaca*, the *Taking of Ilium*, the *Capture of Helen*, and even, with all its sweetness, Musaeus's *Hero and Leander*. From first to last the Greek epic is dominated by Homer.

"In the kingdom of the beautiful in the world below," said Sainte-Beuve, who styled himself a priest of Virgil, "Homer as always and everywhere will be the first and most like a god." The "divine" Homer has been a classic ever since men applied their thought to the evaluation of literature. For to be a "classic" is to possess the ability to persist through different ages and among different peoples because an author discloses, in simple, noble, and beautiful form, some truth of universal humanity, because he lays hold of some passion and gives it a vitality that renews itself, though generation after generation, each with its own moral and intellectual and aesthetic affinities, seems to have exhausted the secret of its power. Homer lives through his responsiveness to a shifting environment, through his power of continual readjustment, and not because he claims the charity of that sympathy vouchsafed by some to the infancy of the race and to those happy children whom we call "the ancients."

It is from the point of view that Homer, through his inexhaustible vitality, has been longer contemporaneous than any other poet of the world that I venture to approach the question of the universality and permanent value of the Greek epic. As a national poet Homer had an unexampled influence on the life and thought of his own people, and he constitutes a dominant part of the cumulative cultural forces of Hellas. He has helped to form the understanding and refine the taste of many great men, and he has been a constant and vivifying influence in European literature. And, finally, the qualities that insured his authority in the past still appeal to the modern world.

A poet who speaks to all the world speaks most of all to his own people. The united voice of Hellas proclaimed Homer as The Poet. To the Greeks, above and beyond Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, stood the poet of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. And in a more profound sense than in the case of any teacher in verse Homer was the educator of a nation. More than Hesiod he shaped that idealistic conception of the gods, which, through him implanted in the nation's faith, distinguishes the religion of Hellas from the polytheisms that paralyzed the spirituality of the nearer East.

In Homer's picture of the Trojan war the Greeks, his own people, saw their first national achievement. Through Homer they became conscious of themselves. The Greeks who fought about the deep-eddying Scamander were their ancestors; and in the fortitude, ambition, nobility, resourcefulness of these men and in their caution, pushed to the verge of cunning, they discerned their own spiritual ideals. From Homer youth learned the legends and the religion of the race. Poets, philosophers, statesmen, orators, historians, scientists, thinkers about God and the veriest triflers with human life, all ranks, all ages, all conditions of men knew and treasured his words. It was not only scholars like Aristarchus who had far-reaching command of his verse. Many had learned both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* word for word; Alexander the Great, whose soul burned to emulate Achilles's love of glory, knew the *Iliad* by heart. For centuries professional rhapsodes, attired in gorgeous apparel, declaimed at the public festivals the verses of Homer before vast audiences. A highly gifted people, whose civilization, if measured by the standard of the number of perfected men it produced, may well be pronounced not inferior to our own, acknowledged, in all the vicissitudes of their national life, unswerving allegiance to the sovereignty of their teacher-poet for more than a thousand years.

So varied and so precise indeed was Homer's acquaintance with life that the Greeks regarded his works as the epitome of all knowledge. From him could be learned the arts of eloquence, war, statesmanship, medicine, and even any craft. This authority had no small part in establishing the orthodoxy of the Greeks' belief that a poet was preëminently a teacher, — a doctrine that to the French has now become *l'hérésie de l'enseignement.* The Greeks never surrendered their moral canon of aesthetics, and Strabo inveighs against the Gallic paradox of Eratosthenes that the poet's aim was to delight the mind and not to instruct. Because of the commanding position he enjoyed as the teacher of youth Homer was made the chief object of Plato's attack in his endeavor to utilize the ethical function of poetry as a means to supplant the older morality of the epic by a more spiritual creed. But the poet who represented men as men are and the gods as his age conceived the gods to be was not to be driven from the schools by the passionate protest of the philosopher who could find no place for the educative forces of feeling in a system built on abstract reason. Four centuries after Plato boys were still studying Homer in school. The teacher of the Emperor Julian bade his charge neglect the pantomime dances of the day — "the Phaeacian youth danced in nobler fashion." The Christians fell afoul of Homer as the incarnation of paganism and borrowed some of their weapons from the armory of Plato. St. Augustine's verdict "dulcissime vanus" unites the condemnation of the rigid moralist and the lingering sensibilities of the sinner. But Basil the Great, in the fourth century of our era, encouraged Christian youth to profit by the pagan poet whose every teaching, he said, inclines to virtue.

For the varied exigencies of life the verses of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had an authority and a pertinence that has been the lot of but one other book. A single line was warrant enough for the "jingoes" of antiquity to back their claim to

others' territory. In a verse built out of Homer the Spartan envoy rejected Gelo's presumptuous demand of leadership as his price for assisting Greece in her struggle for existence against Persia: —

ἦ κε μέγ' οἰμώξειεν ὁ Πελοπίδης 'Αγαμέμνων.

The Roman conqueror of Corinth shed tears when one of his captives, commanded to show his youthful skill in writing, inscribed the verse "Thrice and four times happy the Danaoi who perished there in broad Troy land." The philosopher Hierocles, when scourged in court, flung drops of his blood into the face of his judge, exclaiming with Odysseus,

Come, Cyclops, drink my blood.

To give point, to establish an argument, to suggest to sculptor and painter their ideal, to lend to talk the charm of apt recourse to the poet's art, to furnish matter of dispute alike to the learned, to "corner-buzzers," and to diners-out, to cheer, to console, Homer's words were always on the lips of men.

In every age of the national life Homer renewed himself through his sensitiveness to his surroundings. He had no need of modernization for men at large; that thinkers read into him the ideas of their own times proved his "latent correspondences with human nature." He never became out of date; "clearest-souled" of poets, he never failed to make an immediate appeal to heart and mind. In a larger sense than Dante the poet of a nation, there was in him no mystery of allegory to darken the ways of understanding; no insincerity of belief in the age of chivalry he depicted, as in Tasso or Ariosto; no bias of theological dogma, as in Milton. As he made known the emancipation of the human spirit from Orientalism, so he remained the prophet and the guide of the free Greek mind through all its history.

The permanent value of Homer lies also in the fact that he constitutes a dominant part of the cumulative cultural

forces of our "spiritual ancestors" (as Amiel calls the Greeks) by which the world still lives. Lyric and drama lie nascent in him. Almost every form of the unique literature of the Greeks confesses his authority in thought and language. It is not a small thing for a people that the best comes first. Homer established a standard of distinction which remained a perpetual challenge; he left a legacy of noble artistic ideals; he was the arbiter of taste; he imposed the law of simplicity, lucidity, truth to nature, and self-imposed restraint. Homer first saw the vision of Greece — the equilibrium of moral and physical beauty. Whatsoever things are fair in Greece, whatsoever things the world has inherited from Greece and is not content to let die, these things have their fountain-head in Homer.

The more truly national a poet is, the more readily does he pass the limits of his own nation and enlarge the area of his quickening influence, if he appeals to a common humanity.

Rome is the first station in Homer's progress to the modern world, whose culture unites in the recognition of its historical continuity. It was at Rome that the art of translation of poetry had its first beginning, and Homer was the first poet ever translated. When at last the Latin race, grown to intellectual maturity through Greek tutelage, sought to find a voice at once for its pride as mistress of the world, and for its sense of devotion to the gods who had aided the foundation of the *urbs aeterna*, it found its own Homer in Virgil. No one would have been more astonished than the poet of the *Aeneid* to hear that his poem was thought to be superior or even equal to that of his master, to whom he owed the general movement of his epic, motives both significant and trifling, turns of phraseolgy, and countless matters of detail that made up the dreary catalogue of his literary larcenies compiled by Quintus Octavius Avitus. "Non est erubescendum Vergilio si minorem se Homero vel ipse fatea-

tur," says Macrobius. Virgil's aim was to enfranchise in Latin speech, but in a nobler form than translation, the epic of the sovereign poet

> a quo ceu fonte perenni
> Vatum Pieriis ora rigantur aquis.

To Velleius, Lucan, Silius, Pliny, and Claudian, Homer still remains the type of the immortal poet. But in a burst of admiration on hearing part of the *Aeneid* read aloud, Propertius exulted that his countryman would win the palm of victory over the Greeks. To Juvenal Virgil is the compeer of Homer. Both Homer and Virgil occupy the *arx musicae,* says Priscian. To St. Augustine Virgil is "poeta magnus omniumque praeclarissimus atque optimus." The great controversy has begun.

It is the Roman's position as the poet of Italy, rather than his inherent superiority to Homer, that made Virgil preeminent in the falling Western Empire and in the Middle Ages. While in the East Homer had inherited his large legacy of fame and continued without serious interruption his hold on the culture of the times, in Italy, with the division of the Empire, the ability to read Greek was almost lost by the fifth century. Knowledge of Homer was kept alive in the West by the vogue of Virgil, and it is his fellow-countryman rather than "that Greek, most cherished by the Nine" whom Dante is naturally led to choose as his guide to the dolorous realms of death. There is scarcely any touch of indebtedness to Homer in the *Divine Comedy;* yet with truth to fact and to Virgil's modesty Dante makes his Master say:—

> Mark him
> Who in his right hand bears that falchion keen,
> The other three preceding, as their lord.
> This is that Homer of all bards supreme.

Petrarch stands on the threshold of the revival of Greek studies. He could not read Greek, but he wrote an "enthu-

siastic letter" to Homer. In the National Library at Paris there is a copy of a Latin translation of the *Odyssey*, at the end of which, in a faltering hand, are notes written by the dying poet.

Not until Homer was printed (in 1488) did he really reappear in the West. The day of the indiscriminate taste of the Middle Ages had passed. Soon the poet was devoured by the Humanists in the "holy orgy" of the Renaissance. "I am refreshed and fed by the sight of his words (writes Erasmus) even when I cannot understand him." The second Scaliger, who said that "not to know Greek was to know nothing," as a youth read Homer without a teacher in twenty-one days.

With the sixteenth century there begins that wider acquaintance with the poet which distinguishes the culture of modern Europe. Each nation in turn caught the passion for Greek and for Homer. Like Geneva, in the proud words of a participant in the congress of diplomatists at Vienna, Homer was "not a grain of sand, but a grain of musk that filled all Europe." In the sixteenth century there was published an edition or a translation of the poet, either entire or in part, on an average every eighteen months.

Inspired by Homer to write the *Franciade*, Ronsard gives himself up to an intellectual debauch: —

> Je veux lire en trois jours l'Iliade d'Homère.

He shuts himself up in his room and issues order to his servant: —

> Au reste, si un Dieu vouloit pour moi descendre
> Du ciel, ferme la porte et ne le laisse entrer.

Homer stood in the centre of the battle begun by Perrault in 1687 as to the relative superiority of the ancients and the moderns. To the champions of the ancients Homer was the absolute norm for all other epic poets; the champions of the moderns proclaimed that he was soon to be dethroned, as

Aristotle had already been dethroned; that he was "tout monstrueux" because he descended to the meanness of mentioning things unbecoming a heroic poet. To the age of Louis XIV the epic bard must have a courtier's fastidious nicety of taste. Homer's "black beans and peas" must become "golden grain." Says the Earl of Roscommon:—

> For who without a qualm hath ever look'd
> On holy garbage though by Homer cook'd,
> Whose toiling heroes and whose wounded gods
> Make some suspect he snores as well as nods?

And Fitzgerald, almost in our own time, could not forgive Homer for his "brutal gods and heroes," though the genial Celt confesses that he distrusts his own taste in the face of the approbation of all the rest of the world.

The agitation of literary judgments in the early part of the eighteenth century, with all its aberrancies, clarified the understanding of Homer's art: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not models to follow but masterpieces to inform the judgment; they were not allegories composed to subserve a moral purpose or to represent the conflict of civilization with barbarism. But the age was not ripe for the appreciation of Homer's naturalness, simplicity, and plainness.

The decline of classicism and the awakening to nature meant the rediscovery of Homer. Virgil, to whom excellence in judgment had been assigned, as invention to Homer, lost, except in France, his position of preëminence. Racine had read Homer with ease, Bossuet had known him by heart — and there is a story that he regularly began the composition of his orations by reading his favorite Greek poet. In *Télémaque* Fénelon had cast the spirit of Christianity over an Odyssean epic tinged with ethics and philosophy. But the genius of France was temperamentally Virgilian. Voltaire reviled Homer as he reviled Shakespeare. The appreciation of Homer had to wait for André Chénier, Bernardin de Saint Pierre, and Châteaubriand.

But Germany was meantime swept by a contagion of enthusiasm for Hellenism. Schiller said that if a man has lived only to read the twenty-third *Iliad*, he cannot complain about life; and from his musing over Homer, his companion in his solitary walks in the valley of the Lahn, came Goethe's first zeal for the poet, who (he said) had, together with Polygnotus, taught him every day that "in our own life here above ground we have, properly speaking, to enact Hell."

In England the appreciation of Homer had never suffered eclipse. Milton molded his verse on Virgil's, but his favorite book, next to the Bible, was Homer; and his daughter Dorothy used to read to her father in his blindness the verses of the poet whom all the world then regarded as the blind bard of Chios. Statesmen in solemn and in sportive mood had recourse to the poet's words which Englishmen, like the Greeks themselves, could fit into the occurrences of life. The dying Lord Granville turned for a moment from consideration of the preliminary articles of the Treaty of Paris to repeat the speech of Sarpedon: —

"Ah, friend, if once escaped from this battle, we were forever to be ageless and immortal, neither would I myself fight in the foremost ranks, nor would I send thee into the war that giveth men renown, but now — for assuredly ten thousand fates of death do every way beset us, and these no mortal may escape or avoid — now let us go forward." [1]

Sheridan took Lord Belgrave to task for misquoting Homer in the House of Commons. But his latest biographer pronounces apocryphal the story that when a member of the House fresh from the University ended his speech with a passage from Demosthenes, Sheridan began his reply with the words,

τὸν δ᾽ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη Σεριδάνιος ἥρως.

[1] The translations cited in this article are from Lang, Leaf, and Myers's *Iliad* and from Butcher and Lang's *Odyssey*.

Good Dr. Harrison in *Amelia* is ready with his Homer, and Mrs. Atkinson thinks him superior to all other writers. As captain of the Hampshire grenadiers, and a few years before he conceived the idea of his great work, Gibbon read Homer entire. Shelley said that "as a poet Homer must be acknowledged to excel Shakespeare in the truth, the harmony, the sustained grandeur, the satisfying completeness of his images."

To Carlyle, the poet of "the richest-toned artless music" made equal appeal as to Milton: "I love it" (the *Iliad*), he writes in a letter in 1834, "better than any other book, I think, except the Bible." The *French Revolution*, which was to be "such a book, quite an epic poem, an apotheosis of sansculottism," is full of Homeric reminiscences.

Those who love Homer find him again in part in Clough's *Bothie*. To Tennyson his own *Morte d'Arthur* was one of the twelve books of a great epic, "faint Homeric echoes, nothing worth." *Oenone, Ulysses, Lucretius, The Princess,* attest the poet's love, Virgilian as he was, for "the Ionian father of the rest." To Gladstone, Homer was a "palace of enchantment," and Matthew Arnold pronounced judgment that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the most important poetical monuments in existence.

Such, then, has Homer been to the remoter and the nearer past. What claim has he to occupy a permanent place in the culture of the future?

We are far removed from the temper of mind of the men of the Renaissance, who "went down on their knees" to the Greeks. To-day, the brilliant advance of the physical sciences and the rise of the social sciences tend to displace the centre of gravity of the world's culture. Those who love the ancient classics have no quarrel with science, but they are disturbed at the situation in our own country, where we are now facing the danger of a society apparently intent on depriving itself of that general knowledge of Homer at first-

hand which has marked the culture of Europe for the last four hundred years. "The further from the spring, the more water loses its taste and strength," Luther said, when he found he needed Greek to interpret the *New Testament;* and his utterance loses none of its truth when applied to the language of Homer:

> Ce langage sonore aux douceurs souveraines,
> Le plus beau qui soit né sur les lèvres humaines.

Homer's speech is born of his race and mirrors the total effect of all that appeals to the finer outward sense; it is the flower of Greece in its springtime; it is energetic, harmonious, musical, varied, abounding in life. The diction of the poet is itself confederate to the precision of his vision and the brilliance of his external outline. Homer is vivid because his visual imagery is concrete and because he translates action and emotion into simple yet penetrating language. His style has ease even when it is torrential in its vehemence; it can be plain without losing its nobility. Matthew Arnold's most effective point in his analysis of Homeric diction is that Homer's style retains its distinction alike when the theme is elevated and when it is humble; that it attains magniloquence and avoids tumidity.

But Homer's language and his verse, the spiritual media of his ideas and the echoes of his heroic theme, mean less to the mass of men (who will always read him by proxy) than his picture of human life and of the visible sphere of man's activities.

Were Homer not a poet, he might be called an encyclopaedist. Unobtrusive there lie in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* materials for the study of an entire age more abundant than exist in the case of any other ancient people, the Jews alone excepted. The age he mirrors was an age of justice and of moral feeling, though law and morality were still unborn. It was an age when men had come to recognize that war was dreadful, and yet loved battle; and no one, not even Tolstoi, has

ever pictured war with the vividness of Homer. It was an age when man turned readily to God, upon whom rested his entire dependence; when the primal law of duty was to keep thy word, to honor thy father and thy mother, and to show mercy to the beggar and the suppliant within thy gates. It was an age when belief in the visible presence of his gods brought no enfeeblement of endeavor, but rather spurred man to a completer manifestation of his humanity. Labor was still noble. The spirit of generosity was abroad. Women were treated with a chivalry unknown to the later days of paganism. Insolence and lust had their end appointed in the divine resentment. It was the age when men were strong and brave, and instinctively refined; and, though uncheered by the consolation of a later faith, confronted the thought of eternal gloom in the hereafter with a resignation born neither of apathy nor of despair.

Upon the external world of Homer science has now laid her hand. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have become the quarry of the sociologist and anthropologist. But the lover of poetry will resist an appreciation of the poet which discovers his only claim to permanence in the fact that he is the earliest literary witness to the life of man in Europe; which registers with equal impartiality the boasting of Homer's heroes and the Fijian abuse of their besieged enemies, and equates in the cold light of science the lamentation over Hector's corpse uttered by "that savage woman" Andromache, with the somersaults of a newly bereaved wife in Queensland and the ceremonial wailing of the people of the Zambezi.

But science may not depoetize a dream. To the sociologist Homer will justly remain a document of inestimable value; but to a larger world he makes appeal, not because he provides material to be pigeonholed into Spencer's *Sociology* or Ratzel's *History of Mankind,* but because he views human life, as a poet views it, through a prism that tints the world with golden gleams.

And as a poet Homer's permanence is insured because of his unique place in the literature of the world. The oldest monuments of European poetry, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are akin both to the "popular" epic (if one must retain that squinting expression) and to the literary epic. It has not been without a struggle that criticism has attained to the just perspective of their position. Two centuries ago they were measured by an abstract standard of literary art which postulated an ideal model capable of reproduction in any language, in any nation, and in any age. They were compared directly with the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost,* as if Homer was the poet of a mature and artificial civilization. A century ago it was an axiom of the critic that Homer was a writer of ballad poetry.

We have at last won a just estimate of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* at least on this point. They are neither ballads nor "popular" epics like the Arthurian and Carlovingian romances or the *Nibelungenlied,* nor are they immediately comparable to the *Aeneid,* the *Jerusalem Delivered,* the *Divine Comedy,* or *Paradise Lost.*

To the "popular" epic they are related because they are indigenous and appeal to the spontaneous sympathy of an entire nation, because they deal with events that had won a secure place in the national imagination, because their heroes embody national ideals, because the utterance of their poet is undisturbed by the pressure of personality, with its passing beliefs, its idiosyncrasies, and its constant inclination to force to the front the dissonance of the present and the past. Furthermore, Homer's world has the finality of self-completeness, and that moral harmony which displays no discord between aspiration and achievement. In action, thought, and sentiment, Homer touches common life closely, and even in the Odyssean realm of fancy the human element preponderates over the supernatural. Homer, again, is "popular" because he has perfect ease and grace and vivid-

ness, because he has amplitude and secures totality of impression by fullness of landscape. Like the popular epics, Homer is plain in thought and plain in style. But, unlike these epics, he is also rapid, and he is above all noble.

Iliad and *Odyssey* are the compeers of the great literary epics because of the elevation and wide sweep of the mind of their poet, because of their pervasive artistic excellence in which the nobility of the style answers the nobility of human nature, and because of their abiding and quickening influence on those "sane, well-trained minds of very high calibre whose admiration and delight (as Matthew Arnold said) is the test of supreme excellence in literature."

The heroic epic of the Greeks, with its likeness both to the *Volksepos* and to the literary epic, occupies a place peculiarly its own. In Greece alone the epic, as an artistic form of poetry, came first. In Greece alone the poet did not have to balance alternatives; he whom the Muses inspired was in the earliest period a singer of heroic lays, in the next age a lyric poet, in the next a dramatist. The Greek epic is thus isolated not only because, like all Greek literature, it is untouched by foreign influence, but also because it is the earliest product of that literature. By its isolation the Greek epic gains its supreme originality in comparison with all later poetry which lies under the attraction of the thoughts and ways of thought of the past. Though Homer stands at the end of the heroic age, in the freshness, sincerity, and vividness with which he views the many-colored pageant of human life, he seems almost dissociated from any past. For his sentiment is projected warm from the heart of a race in its adolescence; his words express, do not suggest; his thought is not distilled, does not build any fabric of its own subtle fancy. Homer does not bring a fruitage of ideas already ripened into deeper mellowness because they have been voiced by poets of the past and enriched by the experience of men of different race from age to age. He is un-

touched by the sense of the mysteries of things, by the sense of life's disharmonies that is born of the maturity of the race of men. In his verse there is none of that proud dignity that lingers in the steady and solemn cadences of Virgil, the living voice of Rome's imperial rule. Alone of the great epic poets of the world he has not gleaned amid "alien corn."

Virgil and Dante and Milton furnish to the scholar the refined delight of discovering the contact of mind with mind in associative reminiscence. But if Homer lacks this charm, he has at least escaped the perils of indirectness and of labored allusiveness. The leaves which typify to him the passing of the generations of men are not strewn to his fancy in some Greek Vallombrosa. Homer displays no sense of the conscious effort of literary craftsmanship; the progress of his ideas is not choked by undergrowths of thought; he is not subject to the tyranny of a style, like Milton's, that does not give ample air to the fullness of his thought; of all epic poets he is freest from bad ornament; and he never shows that lack of precision in sympathy which attends the study of man and the visible world through books. Virgil looks at both through Homer's eyes; he does not recreate in his own soul the emotion of his heroes — he has an *index pathologicus* made up chiefly out of Homer. Virgil is, too, a courtier; the muse of Homer keeps her gaze level in the presence of the great, and the poet is merely her interpreter. In Dante philosophy is striving to translate thought into sensible form. Milton contemplates human life with the vision of a priest.

At the outset, Greek poetry looks with the keenness of a painter directly at nature and at man. *Ut pictura poesis* is pervasively true of Homer, who sees only with his own eyes. Scaliger, in scorn of the poet, says that he describes the felling of a tree as if he were a carpenter; and some German thinks the poet's knowledge of human anatomy is such that he must have been an army-surgeon. With what

nice minuteness he observes nature's shifting spectacle—the warring of the winds; the fury of the tempest, the rocking ship, and the angry god beneath the waves; the roar of the torrent heard by the lonely shepherd on the hills; the light that flashed from Achilles's spear before it pierced Hector he likens to Hesperus, "fairest of all stars set in heaven."

Homer, too, foreshadows the national conception of natural beauty, which found greater charm in the loveliness of meadow and stream than in the majestic splendor of mountain heights and ocean. To Homer nature is not something distinct from man in the sense of Rousseau. He does not recognize an animate and an inanimate nature. He paints nature, as a Greek paints it, with man as spectator or auditor of her sights and sounds; he rarely finds in nature the mirror of man's mental state; as he does when Patroclus says to Achilles: "the gray sea and rugged precipices brought thee forth, for rugged is thy heart."

The Greek poet moves by preference in the world of man. Homer is the interpreter of the Muse in whose omniscience fact and fancy have already merged their distinctive outlines; he is not an historian, to whom events are of prime value while their human agents stand in the second line. Man is the central and driving force in Homer. "Upon Homer's hero depends his world." Virgil's hero shines as the divinely appointed founder of Rome, and his every action is controlled by the decrees of the gods. Tasso's heroes shine through reflection of their purpose to free the tomb of Christ. But though it was the will of Zeus that Troy should fall, the warriors on the Trojan plain gain no individual lustre through their joint heroic enterprise. In the panorama of the moving accidents of the *Odyssey*, in all the shifting spectacle of dangers and enchantments, it is what Odysseus does and feels, not what he sees and hears, that is the main spring of interest. The external world is there for man, not man for the external world. The immortals

themselves have their place on Olympus or on Ida or beneath the gray sea only to behold the action that is the expression of the will of man. In the centre of things is man swayed by passion and unchecked save by moral restraint, self-imposed, but figured as obedience to the promptings of the divine regents of the world. In this human sphere, admitting the verification of experience, will and action are justified by speech. About half of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* consists of speeches; with good reason did Plato and Aristotle regard Homer as the father of the drama. The *Iliad* excels in dramatic energy, the *Odyssey* in picturesque effect; but in both poems it is dramatic situation that gives intense vitality and vividness to Homer's men and women, who are all creatures of flesh and blood, and embody the essential characteristics of human nature. Medea, Dido, Francesca da Rimini, Ugolino, Rinaldo, Roland, Brunhilde, Lear and Lady Macbeth are not more inalienable possessions of the world's imagination than Achilles, Ajax, Diomed, Odysseus, Hector, Paris, Helen, Penelope, and Nausicaa.

It is Homer's limitless faculty of invention that gives to the denizens of his human sphere such varied individuality. On his epic scene move graybeards and youths, maidens and matrons, the innocent and the wanton, kings and beggars, princes and demagogues, sages and satirists, rebels and faithful vassals, men of action and men of words — a great assembly of the differences of human faculty and human estate — while high above all the rest towers Peleus's matchless son; Odysseus, undaunted in every danger; Hector, who pardons her who is the cause of his ruin, and is the ideal of the pagan hero in the Christian epic; the woman of the fatal gift of beauty who gazes with shuddering into the vistas of memory; and that other wife, unbetrayed to surrender of her constancy by twenty long years of watching and waiting for the home-coming of her lord. Above and below and among this catholic and gracious humanity move

in supremely beautiful and august forms the divine incarnations of majesty and grace, dignity and loveliness, wisdom and strength.

Homer's characters are limned only in outline and do not appear before us complete; they develop as we watch their attractions and repulsions, perpetually varying in their interrelations. They do not, like Virgil's heroes, exist for themselves alone. And the Greek poet knows well that in literature it is speech, rather than description of action, that serves best to mark the distinctive temper of individuality.

All Homer's heroes, save only Thersites, are brave. But courage has its spiritual anatomy: Agamemnon and Menelaus and Ajax, Idomeneus and Sarpedon and Hector, are all differently brave. Other epic poets do not succeed in keeping Homer's precision of rudimentary outline in marking individuality. Aeneas is an aggregation of piety; Siegfried is an aggregation of excellence. No Homeric hero, except perhaps Diomed, embodies the ideal of flawlessness inherent in the romanticism of the Frank on either side of the Rhine. Achilles excels all the rest in action and in speech. He burns with indignation at all injustice whether he or another is its victim; but he is seen in nature's mirror, not through the prism of idealism; he discovers a momentary savagery at the end of a war that has demoralized society in arms.

The men and women of Homer are our heroized selves, and they are all, save only Penelope perhaps, creatures of vigorous action. The range of their action is as varied as are the incidents that crowd the canvas of the poet. Difficulties and dangers on land and sea, battle in countless forms, the gentler scenes of peace and domestic life, move before our eyes in an ever shifting panorama. But if action is omnipresent and lends an intensity of interest that enthralls the reader, no less significant are the thoughts and sentiments of the actors in this epic drama. Stirred by natural passion and

energy and weaponed with a fine-tempered language, they speak to us of human life in the language of a common humanity; and whether the appeal is to understanding or emotion, it is of universal human interest. Like the women who wail over Patroclus, "in semblance for the dead, but each for her own misery," so the joys and sorrows of successive ages find individual voice in the joys and sorrows of Homer's men and women. Though the poet does not search for scenes of tenderness and pity, by a slightest touch, often by what he leaves unsaid, he sounds the chords of pathos; when the eyes are choked with tears or when the heart is aflame, absolute simplicity surpasses all studied craftsmanship.

The thoughts and sentiments uttered by Homeric personages are compacted of a general experience; they rouse the spirit, they touch the heart, they inform the understanding; they have the note of eternity.

"Dear one," says Hector to Andromache, "I pray thee not to be of oversorrowful heart; no man against my fate shall hurl me to Hades; only destiny, I ween, no man hath ever escaped, be he coward or be he valiant, when once he hath been born."

Hector and his wife — "the stately flower of perfect wifehood"—have realized the substance of Odysseus's prayer for the maiden Nausicaa: "And may the gods grant thee all thy heart's desire: a husband and a home, and a mind at one with his may they give—a good gift, for there is nothing mightier and nobler than when man and wife are of one heart and mind in a house."

In the presence of death the god of light says to the immortals: "It must be that many a man lose even some dearer one than this, his very own brother or perchance a son, yet bringeth he his wailing and lamentation to an end, for an enduring heart have the Fates given unto men."

When Glaucus has been accosted by Diomed in the press of battle, he says: "Son of Tydeus, of great soul, why

askest thou my race? Even as are the generations of leaves such are those likewise of men; the leaves that be the wind scattereth over the earth, and the forest buddeth and putteth forth more again, when the season of spring is at hand; so of the generations of men one springeth up and another passeth away."

In the fifth *Iliad* when Diomed has routed his mortal foes and even turns to encounter Apollo, he is rebuked: "Desire not to match thy spirit with gods, since there is no comparison of the race of immortal gods and of men that walk upon the earth."

But if mortal men must give way before the gods whom they revere, they are never marionettes in the hands of the puissant Olympians. Man's action may be modified or diverted by the direct influence of a god; but man's will is never rudely overborne without a struggle, never destroyed by divine command. Even those decisions which are apparently suddenly formed on the appearance of a god are already dormant in the hero's mind. The divine epiphany is only the external sign of the reaction of the soul.

As to the gods themselves, though Milton may regulate his divine mechanism with a profounder logic, yet Homer has an artistic advantage over all the Christian poets in the multiplicity of his supernatural beings, as he has also in the range of his imagery. The sense of reality of Homer's divine agents, the direct and visible participants in human affairs, lends to the Greek epic a sincerity and a naturalness beyond the power of later art to simulate. For the gods of Homer are virtually men in whom the limits of human physical finiteness have been extended or men freed entirely from these limits. If they are therefore less awful and sublime than the supernatural agents of other poets, they are not philosophical or theological conceptions, as in Virgil and Milton, which have taken on material form because they were otherwise incapable of visualization.

But we may not demand of a national epic impregnated with the Stoic conception of the world, or of epics founded on a revealed religion, the free play of the imaginative instinct with regard to the divine that marks the adolescence of the Hellenic race. If Homer's themes cannot vie in implicit grandeur with Virgil's or Dante's or Tasso's or Milton's, it is also to be borne in mind that it is not (as Arnold reminds us) the nature of their subject which occasions the fine style of the greatest artists in words; as it is also not the nature of their theme that is the sole spring of their ideas

On Man, on Nature and on Human Life.

As the immortals in Homer know each other whenever they meet and in whatever disguise, so the greatest poets of the world are akin, whatever their theme. It is Homer's province to depict in all its freshness and strength and beauty the irrecoverable youth of the world, to trace the lineaments of human life still so simplified to nature that it rests on the primal emotions of the heart, to picture an astonishing variety of incident, and with minute precision to set forth abundant riches of human experience, to catch the spirit of an age, and to give more than any other poet of the Greeks themselves the very essence of the Greek spirit.

If poetry is only dreamland, if the warring Greeks and Trojans are as unsubstantial as Circe's spells, this far-off poet of another clime sends us (as do our growing years) into glad exile to our dreams.

Herbert Weir Smyth.